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The 49th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival
Karlovy Vary, 4–12 July 2014

A Report by Natascha Drubek, University of Regensburg / FU Berlin

The International Film Festival in Karlovy Vary (KVIFF), Czech Republic benefits from its unique location between Eastern and Western Europe. In recent years, under the artistic direction of Karel Och, it has shown an increased interest in American film production and history. Nevertheless, Och maintains KVIFF's strongest point, the Eastern connection which was formed over many decades. After the Second World War KVIFF evolved from a national, to a "Slavic", then to an international festival—with a unique slant: after the Communist takeover (1948) it turned into a showroom of productions from Socialist People's Republic countries. The Czechoslovak festival aimed to compete with Cannes and Venice, particularly on an ideological and political level (Drubek, "46th Karlovy Vary").

According to de Valck and Loist, the six axes under which to study film festivals are "film, economics, institution, reception, place, and the extra level of the network and history" (181). In Karlovy Vary "network and history" not only provide the dominant festival flavour but form also a basis for its competition and the principles of programming. "Place and network" combined with "institution" ensure the return of graduates of FAMU, the Film School in Prague, which was founded at the same time as the festival. Many FAMU alumni from former Eastern bloc countries have maintained their connection with Bohemia: Lordan Zafranović, a member of the Yugoslav "Prague School", presented his new film here in 2013, at the 48th festival edition (Radić), and the Polish director Agnieszka Holland came to KVIFF as the president of the Grand Jury in the same year. Both had studied at FAMU with Elmar Klos, the first Czech director to receive an Academy Award, in 1965 (Dawes). There was another reason for Holland to visit Western Bohemia: KVIFF screened all of Holland's HBO Europe miniseries *Burning Bush* (2013) during the festival. Having studied in Prague in the same era in which the film is set, Holland was part of a student resistance group after August 1968 and was even imprisoned for her involvement in samizdat publications.¹ After having been aired on TV in the Czech Republic and other Eastern and Central European countries earlier in 2013, the KVIFF screening enabled Holland to meet with her local and international audiences in a festival setting. As Leo Barraclough has explained, Holland "rarely accepts invitations to join fest juries ... yet she considered Karlovy Vary to be an exception: 'It is a different selection—more open and unexpected than other big festivals—chosen with a sensibility that is close to my heart'" ("Karlovy Vary").

KVIFF is primarily an international event, yet it has a distinctive Czech flavour. The atmosphere of KVIFF as a European "film Woodstock" (Willoughby) was the unique selling point of the festival in the 1990s. Until today it has been able to retain its audience-friendly,

relaxed atmosphere. Simultaneously, its importance for the international film industry and the international press has vastly increased.

The 2014 Grand Jury awarded its main prize, the Crystal Globe, to the Georgian director George Ovashvili for *Corn Island* (*Simindis Kundzuli*, 2014). The film tells the story of an old Abkhazian peasant who cultivates corn on the fertile soil of a small temporary island in a river that forms the border between Georgia and Abkhazia—a “dangerous place”, as one of the patrolling soldiers remarks. Shot on 35mm film and with sparse dialogue, *Corn Island* relies heavily on images. When characters speak, we hear one of the three languages of that region, Abkhazian, Georgian and Russian. The film shows the passing of time in the maturing of the peasant’s granddaughter and the growth of one crop of corn, but the harvest on the border island proves to be as fragile as the peace in the multiethnic region of the Caucasus. At the end of the film the islet is literally torn apart—a painful metaphor for breakaway Abkhazia.

For the first time, the main competition included a full-length animated film, *Rocks in My Pockets* (Signe Baumane, 2014), directed and narrated by a female director based in New York. Latvian-born Signe Baumane astonished viewers with her intense but at the same time humorous autobiography of depression as part of a family history punctuated by hidden female suicides. Baumane’s film avoids the allegories prevalent in artworks attempting to capture this illness, as in Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2012); instead *Rocks in My Pockets* grapples with the topic by combining the verbal tricks of a New York psychiatrist with disarming Baltic frankness and all the comic relief we often associate with animated film. This brave and sophisticated exposure of her own illness earned Baumane the FIPRESCI prize.

Following the 2012 change of rules, limiting the submission of debut and sophomore films, the “East of the West” competition seemed substantially weaker. In 2014 it has regained its élan: a lot of fresh talent surfaced in this section in which first and second films from Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Turkey and the countries of the former Soviet Union presented in World, International and European premieres compete. The winner was the outstanding feature-film debut *Corrections Class* (*Klass Korrektsii*, 2014) by the Russian director Ivan Tverdovsky.² *Corrections Class*, not unlike Andrei Zviagintsev’s oeuvre, returns to Russian traditions of discussing ethical dilemmas through art. Additionally, the FEDEORA award for the best film from “East of the West” competition went to *Bota* (2014), directed by Iris Elezi and Thomas Logoreci. “Bota”, meaning “The World”, is a café in the middle of the Albanian swamps; its owner and his employee are at the centre of this film, which in its final act transforms into a political allegory.

The “East of the West” Balkan entries were mostly above average, although some would have benefitted from a script doctor. The beautifully shot *The Tree* (*Drevo*, 2014) by Sonja Prosenc is a film that could not decide whether it is about a particular ritual of vengeance or a universal problem in small communities which cannot forgive a killing, even if accidental. New in 2014 was the inclusion of Greek and Turkish films, but with no strong candidates as yet.

Afterlife (*Utóélet*, 2014) by Virág Zomborác was one of the two Hungarian films in the “East of the West” section. This debut, filled with a morbid sense of humour, is about a young man (a memorably whimsical performance by Marton Kristof) who is followed by his

suddenly deceased tyrannical father as a patriarchal ghost on his journeys through the bleak Hungarian countryside. *Afterlife* was supported by the Hungarian National Film Fund introduced in 2011 by the Hungarian government. Due to state funding and tax incentives the Hungarian film industry has experienced a “movie renaissance” in recent years (Barracough, “Hungary’s Movie Renaissance”). The Hungarian Fund directs production and distribution in two ways. One is a campaign which encourages Hungarians to watch more Hungarian films in movie theatres; it appeals to the emotional side of the population, addressing togetherness and national pride (with the slogan “Sit beside me and watch Hungarian films”). Not all of Hungary’s film world is willing to take part in the promotion of this kind of “national” filmmaking, especially if it excludes certain minorities. This has been seen recently in the unwillingness of a Hungarian festival to screen films with Roma topics, a decision criticised by director Béla Tarr, president of the Hungarian Filmmakers’ Association (Macnab). The other target of the Hungarian Fund is the international public opinion. It seems that the increasing home production of art-house and historical films aims to improve the image of Hungarian culture abroad. At a festival such as KVIFF the offer of Hungarian films was certainly able to distract audiences and film critics from the alarming news related to growing nationalist tendencies in this country. In recent years international observers were shocked by examples of rampant racism and the unwillingness of the Hungarian state to deal with this problem; so much so that during the Berlin Film Festival in 2012 Hungarian ministry officials felt compelled to distribute leaflets to the audience of Bence Fliegauf’s *Just the Wind* (*Csak a szél*, 2012), a film exposing aggressions against Roma in Hungary today. The leaflets did little to persuade the audiences and the jury that Hungarian society does not suffer from racism and the film itself won the Silver Bear.

Resorting to historical narratives is one of the strategies used to divert the attention of festival audiences from current politics. Films, in this respect, are more effective than leaflets, for instance gripping movies such as the 2013 winner of the Grand Prix Crystal Globe, the war drama *The Notebook* (*A nagy füzet*, Janos Szasz, 2013), based on Ágota Kristóf’s excellent book of the same title. *The Notebook* tells the story of two identical twin brothers in wartime Hungary who are sent to the countryside to live with their estranged grandmother (Piroska Molnár), and describes the imminent division of Europe as a family story which morphs into a tragic tale of twins orphaned not during but after the war. Szasz’s collaboration with Christian Berger, the cinematographer of *The White Ribbon* (*Das weiße Band—Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*, Michael Haneke, 2009), proved fruitful: his barren Hungarian exterior and interior landscapes rival those he delivered for Haneke. The European coproduction was the first picture supported by the Hungarian National Film Fund and was shortlisted for the Academy Awards. Molnár we meet again in *Free Fall* (*Szabadesés*, 2014), winner of the 2014 Special Jury Prize and Best Director Award. This film is an artistically ambitious project by the director of *Taxidermia* (2006), György Pálfi. It is certainly no surprise that Pálfi—who in a 2013 interview stated that “[m]y life is short. I don’t want to dedicate my life to political filmmaking”—is now onto his next state-funded project, a historical drama (Kuzma).³

Looking at the competing films and the recipients of these prizes, there seems to be little overlap with those stars who were invited to the festival. Every year KVIFF hosts international celebrities from the English-speaking world; some of them, such as Danny DeVito, Jude Law or Helen Mirren, in the past played in the KVIFF popular opening trailers which are shown before every screening. In 2013 KVIFF greeted John Travolta and Oliver Stone, with Stone’s critique of his native country alienating the conservative Czech press. In

2014 two other Hollywood figures received the Crystal Globe for artistic contribution to world cinema. One of them was Mel Gibson, whose nomination caused a stir in the Federation of Czech Jewish Communities which accused KVIFF of breaking away from fundamental Czech democratic thinking. Criticism was extended to the Czech host of a talk show who glazed over Gibson's notorious racist drunken rants (Bláhová). The festival directors insisted on a division between personal views and professional achievements; it was, however, Gibson's cinematic gospel *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) which created controversy, tapping on outlived Christian models of anti-Judaism. The nominations for the cumulative prizes for "Artistic Contribution to World Cinema" or "Lifetime Achievement Awards" as the backbone of KVIFF's celebrity programme had not been politically controversial in the past; however, in 2013 and 2014 some of the invited celebrities either were internationally provocative figures or they provoked the Czechs by their political statements. KVIFF's neglect of the possible political repercussions of its choices could be explained as a reaction to the overly politicised history of the festival from the 1940s to the 1980s as described on the festival website:

The great social and political changes that took place after November 1989 finally freed the Karlovy Vary festival from political pressure. In the future, what the festival offered the public, given tough domestic and international competition, would determine its existence—not the interests of the state. ("A Brief Festival History")

The other recipient of the noncompetitive globe was William Friedkin, who taught an inspiring and highly inclusive master class. Not only did he speak about his films such as *The Exorcist* (1973) or the newly restored *Sorcerer* (1977), but also of his admiration for the golden era of film musicals, and the writings of Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera.

Richard Linklater's film *Boyhood* (2014)—which covers, similar to Tolstoy's trilogy of novels *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth* (1852–56), twelve crucial years in the life of a boy—in the KVIFF context corresponded with a documentary film genre cultivated locally. Long before *Boyhood* set out on its path in 2002, Czech filmmaker Helena Třeštíková started her cycle of time-lapse projects documenting the life stories of young delinquents. One of them, *René* (2008), was awarded the European Academy Award. Other esteemed guests included actress Laura Dern, actress/director Asia Argento, and indie director Debra Granik (*Winter's Bone*, 2010), as part of the tribute to production company Anonymous Content. In an interview Granik stressed the Eastern European cinematic upbringing of her mentor, Boris Frumin, who introduced her to the Czechoslovak new Wave (Přivřelová).

It would be unfair to say that the founders of KVIFF only use their good connections with the U.S. film industry for PR and sponsor relationships. KVIFF's industry office offers several networking events with American professionals, both Hollywood and indie. The cooperation with America manifests itself also in a sidebar called "*Variety* Critic's Choice: Europe Now!"⁴ As an American trade journal, *Variety* mainly reviews films which have a potential for Anglophone audiences. It reflects an American perspective on European cinema instructive for filmmakers working in Europe who want to succeed globally. Why did the sidebar emerge in Karlovy Vary? Alissa Simon, its curator from 2010 to 2013, explained that the sidebar started seventeen years ago as an idea of Steven Gaydos who introduced the *Variety* "Critic's Choice" segment, highlighting the work of up-and-coming European directors. Simon stressed that the East-meets-West aspect of this collaboration showed the American interest in (re)emerging film cultures. The *Variety* strand focuses on directors from

a specific geographical area who are at the beginnings of their careers. The choice of the films in the sidebar is based on positive reviews in the journal without limitations in genre or topic. In 2014 Peter Debruge, chief international film critic of *Variety*, was responsible for the selection of the ten films, among them the drama *Calvary* (John Michael MacDonagh, 2014), about an Irish priest marked for death by one of his parishioners, the winner of the KVIFF “Work in Progress” prize of 2013, and the Georgian–Ukrainian coproduction *Blind Dates* (*Shemtkhveviti paemnebi*, 2014) by Levan Koguashvili, which harks back to the tradition of Georgian film comedy. The *Variety* strategy goes hand in hand with the overall aim of festivals of showcasing filmmakers in the early stages of their careers.

Under the title “Industry Days”, the Festival provides a platform for informal networking which can provide professional mentoring and opportunities for exploring collaborations. The Film Industry Office in 2014 hosted new workshops: “Supporting ‘Fragile’ Films—A Realistic Dream?” offered advice on distributing niche films to European audiences, and “Film New Europe Coproduction Meeting” looked at international coproductions with the involvement of Central European cinema together with well-established events such as “Works in Progress”. Here, fifteen producers of Central and Eastern European films in the stage of postproduction pitched their projects, with the chance to win a 10,000 EUR prize in services from the Barrandov studio, Prague. 2014’s winner was the film *Goat* (*Koza*, Ivan Ostrochovský, 2014) about the life story of a Rom who was a boxer at the 1996 Olympic Games and is now struggling with financial problems. It is coproduced by Jaromír Konečný, who produced films such as *Made in Ash* (*Až do mesta Aš*, 2012) and *Eugenic Minds* (*Eugéniové*, Pavel Štingl, 2013). The “Pitch & Feedback” showcase then, which is limited to Czech and Slovak films, provides filmmakers with critical feedback in script development.

Each year KVIFF offers a comprehensive panorama of the current production in Central and Eastern Europe. Along with it comes a procession of filmmakers, producers, distributors and journalists from these and other countries forming a bridge between East and West, not merely showcasing Eastern European film. In this respect KVIFF’s main competitor in the region, and maybe in the world, is the traditionally more political Berlin Film Festival which, compared to KVIFF, attracts delegates from Central and Eastern Europe mainly with its film market. However, in 2014 it was not Berlin but rather Karlovy Vary which prepared the grounds for a dialogue between three deeply political films from the post-Soviet region: *Leviathan* by Andrei Zviagintsev (2014), *The Tribe* (*Plemya*, Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy, 2014) and *Maidan* (Sergei Loznitsa, 2014). Additional context for these films emerged not only in interviews and additional screenings—Slaboshpytskiy presented his short films *Diagnosis* (*Diagnoz*, 2009), *Deafness* (*Glukhota*, 2010), and *Nuclear Waste* (*Yaderny vydhody*, 2012)—but also through their reception in a country formerly belonging to the Soviet bloc. Images and sounds of the singing of all the people in the Kyiv maidan revolution must have felt differently in Cannes and to the Czech and Slovak audiences who remember their “Velvet” Revolution of 1989, which had its own “magic voice” in Marta Kubišová.⁵ In the light of the recent Russian takeover of Crimea, the older generation at this Czech festival was also reminded of the “brotherly help” brought by the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968.⁶ In this sense, KVIFF proved to have a higher degree of sensitivity towards the history and the current situation in the former Soviet bloc than any other festival.

Notes

¹ In an interview with Emil Majuk, Holland explains why she did not attend Łódź film school but went to Prague instead after having seen the Czech New Wave films.

² This film received a Special Mention from FEDEORA, Federation of Film Critics of Europe and The Mediterranean. For a detailed review see Drubek, “Powerful Image”.

³ In the same interview Pálfi has admitted: “It is possible that you won’t get funded if you open your mouth too wide”.

⁴ Since it started to collaborate with the European Film Promotion (EFP) in 2011, this strand was relabelled “10 Euro Directors to Watch” until 2013. EFP, based in Hamburg, works for the worldwide promotion of European cinema in the international market.

⁵ It was Marta Kubišová, singer and dissident, who in November 1989 sang the “Prayer for Marta” on Prague’s central square. Olga Sommerová’s documentary about her, *The Magic Voice of a Rebel* (*Magický hlas rebely*, 2014), won the KVIFF audience prize in 2014.

⁶ Central Europeans appreciate Russian director Alexander Sokurov’s recent admonishment concerning the relations between Russia and Ukraine: “We, Russians, are not brothers of the Ukrainians, just plain neighbours” (qtd. in Karelova).

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